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## THE DAY OF NATIONAL PRAYER AND FASTING,

SEPT. 26, 1861, APPOINTED BY THE PRESIDENT ON THE  
RECOMMENDATION OF BOTH HOUSES OF CONGRESS.

FROM A SERMON OF THE REV. DR. E. L. CLEVELAND,  
NEW HAVEN, SEPT. 1, 1861.

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"This kind goeth not out but by PRAYER AND FASTING," said our Lord on a trying occasion; and the words are applicable to the church in all periods of time. Religious fasting is a natural method by which the soul expresses its grief for sin. Even the heathen Ninevites, when deprecating the judgments of God, kept a rigorous fast. On the murder of Abner, David said, "God do so to me and more also if I taste bread, or aught else, till the sun be down;" and again it is recorded, he "humbled his soul with fasting." Daniel "set his face to seek the Lord by prayer and supplication with fasting." Nehemiah "mourned certain days and fasted." Anna "served God with fastings and prayers." "Four days ago I was fasting until this hour," said Cornelius; when God declared to him, "Thy prayer is heard." Paul and his brethren "approved themselves as ministers of God, in labors, in watchings, in fastings;" and our Lord, in preparation for his ministry, fasted forty days.

As our Chief Magistrate has appointed a day for national fasting and prayer in behalf of our country in its present sore trial, the occasion seems a favorable one for considering the PROPER MANNER of keeping a public fast.

1. The *entire day* should be given up to the duty. It is a day of humiliation and prayer, and not merely the hour spent in the sanctuary. To meet the occasion and avert the threatening danger, we need a greatly deepened sense of our own exceeding sinfulness; we need to be filled with the spirit of prayer and the power of faith; and need the entire day devoted to self-inspection and abasement, to repentance and supplication. It will greatly promote this frame of mind, if the cares and engrossments of business be laid aside, and we are permitted to feel that we have nothing to do on that day but to fast and pray, and prostrate ourselves before God.

2. To keep a public fast acceptably, we must not neglect *assembling ourselves together* for humiliation and worship. A public fast must have public meetings and services. God can indeed see and hear in secret; but in this, as in other duties

of religion, he appeals to the social principle of our nature. Thus he summoned his ancient people : " Sanctify ye a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the Lord your God, and cry unto the Lord." God would have us *mourn* by churches, just as he would have us rejoice and praise by churches. He calls for " all the inhabitants of the land " to assemble for prayer ; the old and the young, even little children, are to be gathered in the sanctuary. Surely, if any one class has more to gain or to lose by the present conflict than another, it is the rising generation. To them belongs that great future which, if we succeed, is to open in unprecedented blessings on this western continent ; or that night of ages which, if we fail, is to settle down on this fair hemisphere. Whether their day of life is to be passed under the bright sky of that glorious nationality which protects all its subjects and all their interests from foes without and traitors within, or under the black banner of an intolerable oppression ; whether they are to walk these plains and hills with the firm tread of freemen, or with the timid step of bondmen ; amid scenes of peace and prosperity, or of war and poverty, must depend upon our success at the throne of grace. Have not our children, then, a profound interest in this coming fast ? Ought they not to assemble with us in the sanctuary, and take part with us in the humiliation ? We trust each house will be filled with a great congregation of the old and the young, bound as by one impulse and under a common burden, before the footstool of divine mercy.

3. There must be *actual fasting*. It is a mockery of God to pretend to observe a fast and yet not abstain from food. If we profess to keep the fast, we should do so in good faith ; and not, by presenting ourselves in one manner in public, and another in private, provoke, instead of turning away, the righteous displeasure of the Most High.

4. We must *mourn and pray in private* as well as in public. Our devotion must not be confined to public meetings. Every *family* must mourn apart ; for what have not families to suffer if this rebellion triumph ? Every individual too must mourn in secret ; let each one seek out some spot where, unseen, he may pour out his soul before God for himself and his country.

5. The most essential part of a true fast is the *sincere humbling of ourselves before God for our sins*. This embraces our sins as individuals, as a church, and as a nation ; it demands not only a survey of the present, but a review of the past. All our sins of every date and of every kind are known to

God, and have something to do with the calamities we are suffering. We are suffering to-day for national sins all along the path of our history, and it becomes us to bring all these things into remembrance before God. Let it be observed too, that there can be no genuine humiliation for sin, if we are thinking only or mainly of other men's offences: if we devote ourselves to the rehearsal and denunciation of crimes not our own, we do but reënact the part of the boasting Pharisee, and provoke the anger we desire to avert. We are not to exalt, but to humble ourselves. Whatever sins we confess, it must be in the spirit of self-abasement, not of censoriousness. Let us not forget that, despite the pretended secession of states, we are still one nation; we acknowledge no dismemberment. We appear before God on this fast as one people humbling ourselves for all our national sins, whenever or wherever committed. One class of offences abound in some parts of the republic; in other parts, a different class; but all of them belong to the one nation we call our country. All of them contribute to the injury and disgrace of that nation; and all are to be confessed and bewailed as a part of our national sin and shame. There may be particulars in which it is right for us to defend ourselves from the aspersions of men against whom we have done no wrong; but on this day of fasting we stand before the bar of God, in whose sight the heavens are unclean, and how much more the human heart! In his presence our holiest things require purifying; our repentance must be repented of, and our very tears of sorrow need washing again. The great object of this appointment is to propitiate the divine favor; but this is impossible, unless He who looks on the heart sees that we are truly and deeply humble in view of our personal and national sins.

Never since our fathers fasted and prayed amid their desperate struggle for national independence, have we had so much reason to humble ourselves before God as at the present moment. When I recall the heaven-provoking sins which, as a people, we have been accumulating against ourselves in the past years of our existence, when I think of the rapid increase of every species of crime in all parts of the land, and when I reflect that God is just, and that his justice can be executed upon nations only in this world, I confess to a fearful misgiving as to the scenes about to open upon us. Whether this be not the beginning of a judgment which shall consume the land until the people shall know and acknowledge that there is a God in heaven who ruleth in the earth, and who will be had in



reverence of all his creatures, is a question which only He can determine. That the cause for which we are contending is a just one, I have not a doubt. I can and do pray for it with a full and unwavering heart. I believe it to be the cause of good government, humanity, and religion. Even should our enemies triumph over us, it would be no proof that they are right and we are wrong on the questions now at issue. So triumphed Egypt over Israel, Nebuchadnezzar over Judah, Papists over Huguenots, Russia over Poland, Austria over Hungary, but not because the right was wholly with the victors, and all the wrong with the vanquished. God has wise ends in permitting these things. And how do we know that our impenitence and unbelief are not imposing upon him the necessity of humbling and distressing us still more? It is in vain to talk of our twenty millions, of our vast resources of money and means, of our indomitable energy and invincible prowess. The panic of one sad day should teach us how our pride and power may be humbled. Panics are as truly God's instruments in frustrating the purposes of man as pestilences, and we have no adequate defence against them, except in the protection of his shield. Let us not then put our trust in armies, or in generals, but appeal rather to Him who holds these mighty agents of destruction in the hollow of his hand. HIS FAVOR IS ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL TO OUR SUCCESS. If we think to crush this rebellion without his aid, we shall find ourselves woefully mistaken. And if we think to secure that aid without humiliation and prayer, we shall probably discover the error too late to escape its ruinous consequences. *With what unanimity then, with what earnestness and solemnity, with what humility and godly sorrow, with what fervent and believing supplication ought we to keep the appointed fast.* May it be kept as never fast was kept here before. May the sun of that day look down upon the entire people mourning, weeping, and confessing their sins, and pouring out their hearts in prayer to God in behalf of their country. Then will our offerings go up as sweet incense, and he will remember us, and his ancient mercy to our fathers, and turn again and save us.

\* \* Copies of the above may be had of the AMERICAN TRACT SOCIETY, 150 Nassau-street, New York. The Society also publish The Soldier's Camp Library, Soldier's Pocket Library, Cromwell's Soldier's Bible, and Tracts for Soldiers in English, German, and other languages.